

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

A record of the Heath Rat, *Pseudomys shortridgei* and other fauna from Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve - During 3 - 9 June 1992 the southern section of Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve (A Class Reserve No. 36128, Shire of Lake Grace) was trapped as part of a project examining the biology and ecology of the threatened Western Mouse *Pseudomys occidentalis*. This involved regular six weekly trapping sessions each over five nights, using medium Elliott traps (30 x 10 x 10 cm) baited with a mixture of peanut butter, rolled oats and sultantas. On 8 June a male Heath Rat *P. shortridgei* was captured 500 m north of Dragon Rocks and 100 m west of Dragon Rocks Road (33°49'05", 119°02'04"). The specimen weighed 59.6 g, had a head length of 37.3 mm, and a pes of 25.3 mm. It was retained and accessed into the W.A. Museum collection (M39967). Vegetation at the capture site was Very Open Shrub Mallee over Heath A over Very Open Tall Sedges on Sandy Clay Loam soils with a laterite gravel component. The vegetation had not been burnt for 30 - 50 years. This individual was trapped in association with *P. occidentalis*, *Mus musculus* and *Sminthopsis crassicaudata*.

This record is significant as the last Heath Rat record for this area was in 1931 from near Lake Bidby, 25 km SSE of the current capture site at Dragon Rocks (M1389 and M1306). More recent records have been from the Fitzgerald River National Park and Ravensthorpe Range area 200 km to the south. This species was not recorded in the previous surveys of Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve in the 1970s by the then Fisheries and Wildlife Department and in later trapping exercises by the Department

of Conservation and Land Management. It is likely that this species is surviving at low densities within Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve.

Other interesting fauna recorded for Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve include Mallee Fowl *Leipoa ocellata*, Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*, Mitchell's Hopping Mouse *Notomys mitchellii*, Ningauai *Ningauai yvonnae* and Stripe-faced Dunnart *Sminthopsis macroura*.

- LEIGH WHISSON, CALM, W.A. Wildlife Research Centre, P.O. Box 51, Wanneroo W.A. 6065

Observations on Honey Possums - During a visit to Cape Arid National Park from 7 - 11 October 1993, a small area supporting a large number of Honey Possums *Tarsipes rostratus* was discovered. A population estimated to be in the hundreds was seen feeding mainly on *Calothamnus* sp. The vegetation was a dense dune thicket, consisting mainly of *Banksia speciosa* and *Calothamnus* sp. The animals were feeding throughout the day. This is unusual as they have been recorded to feed almost entirely at night (Wooler *et al.* 1993. *J. Zool., Lond.*, 229: 651-658). The animals tended to be more numerous after 1630hrs and in the early morning before 0930hrs. The bushes were not surveyed after 1930hrs, but on one occasion they were checked at 2100hrs, and the animals were still feeding. The weather was cold and rainy, but even when the sun came out the possums were active.

It was possible for an observer to sit within 0.5 m of the bushes without a reaction from the animals as long as movements were slow and talking soft. It took about 10 minutes for the

possums to reappear after a disturbance.

The animals were so numerous that it was impossible to recognise individuals and to work out their social interactions without marking them. However, there was a fair amount of fighting between them. It also appeared that the males may have been feeding more during the day while the females and young were seen more in the evening and early morning.

The Honey Possums responded to the alarm call of the New Holland Honeyeaters in the area. When kestrels flew overhead and the honeyeaters called, the Honey Possums disappeared into the undergrowth and "froze". One evening the honeyeaters appeared very agitated over some unseen threat. For several hours during the disturbance not a single Honey Possum was seen. An observer arriving on the scene during this period would have assumed the site to have been devoid of these marsupials.

On one occasion between 0530hrs and 0900hrs, numerous matings were observed. On this morning there seemed to be more activity in the bushes. There was a lot of fighting. The males, which are much smaller than the females, crept up on the females and mated. Sometimes the pair actually fell to the ground during the process. Mating seemed to last about 20 – 30 seconds. Because the animals were so numerous it was hard to determine whether the same male was mating repeatedly with a particular female. However, it seemed that the males were guarding their females, and that fighting broke out when another male started to approach a guarded female.

Tiger Snakes were seen hunting very stealthily in the bushes where the Honey Possums were, although they were not actually seen catching prey.

Because of the surprise of seeing so many Honey Possums, the area was surveyed to see how far the population extended. Around the camp site near Jorndee Creek the Possums were numerous wherever there were *Calothamnus* bushes. Other places in the vicinity of the camp site where there were clumps of *Calothamnus* were found to have Honey Possums, but they were not as numerous.

Subsequently, *Calothamnus* bushes were examined at Cape Le Grande and the Fitzgerald River National Parks but no Honey Possums were seen. We assume, therefore, a localised population explosion had occurred in the original observation area, and that competition for food may have prompted the diurnal feeding behaviour.

Most of these observations were also noted by John and Helen Start who visited the same area from 17 – 19 October 1993, although they did not see the animals mating.

– JUDY and ANDRE DU PLESSIS, 42 Ronneby Road, Lesmurdie 6076

Darter at Karonie in the Eastern Goldfields – On 6 April 1993 we observed a solitary Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* on the old railway water supply dam at Cardunia Rocks near Karonie approximately 100 km east of Kalgoorlie. In spite of widespread and heavy rains in the Goldfields in 1992 and extensive wetland survey work as a consequence, this is only the second record in the region that we are aware of. Storr (1986, *Birds of the Southeastern Interior of Western Australia*,